WASHINGTON POST

JANUARY 2, 2002

Pg. B1

Scholars First, Soldiers Second

Chicago Public School Uses Military Methods to Make Model Students

By Nancy Trejos, Washington Post Staff Writer

CHICAGO -- It's time for the morning drill.

A few hundred teenagers in crisp green Army uniforms stand in lines, their backs straight, their chins up, their eyes looking directly ahead. They end their sentences with sir or ma'am, they wear shiny belt buckles and newly polished black shoes, and they get yelled at -- a lot.

"No hands in the pocket. Give me 10," Master Sgt. Walter Littleton tells one cadet. The cadet drops to the floor for a set of push-ups.

This could be a scene out of West Point, but it isn't. This is a public high school in Chicago, one of the first in the nation devoted to the Army JROTC program and partially funded by the Army -- a blueprint for a military academy that will open in August in Prince George's County.

Now in its third year, the Chicago Military Academy has become a model for what military education can do. Among the 98 public secondary schools in Chicago, this school in a tough, Southside neighborhood has one of the highest attendance rates, one of the lowest chronic truancy rates and some of the highest standardized test scores.

Like the Forestville community that will house Prince George's new academy, the Bronzeville neighborhood around Chicago's school is predominately African American. There are many low-income households, and the area is plagued by crime, unemployment, gang activity and drug use.

Academy officials say they are offering the 375 students who attend the school structure, leadership training and the promise of academic achievement to help them escape from the chaos of their impoverished neighborhoods. Students say they feel safer at the military school, where the gang activity they find near their homes and at other public high schools is not tolerated.

"Our goal basically is to take these kids and make them leaders, better citizens, to take them off the streets," said Sgt. Mario Villarreal, a JROTC instructor.

The idea has caught the attention of public school districts nationwide: The public Oakland Military Institute opened this year, and Chicago has opened its second public military high school.

Forestville High School is on track to become the Washington region's first public military high school, despite continuing resistance from parents. Prince George's Superintendent Iris T. Metts signed an agreement last June to convert Forestville, one of the county's lowest-performing schools, into a college preparatory military academy for

a student body that will eventually top 1,000.

"We're putting them on the right path to further their education," Metts said. "We hope we'll be giving them the belief in themselves that they can do it. We'll give them the pride and the discipline."

'They Fought for Me'

It's that type of guidance that Lavin Curry desperately needed.

When Curry arrived at the Chicago Military Academy as a freshman in 1999, he was brash, he was wild. "He was a bad little sucker, always into something, always thought he was right," said Frank C. Bacon, the academy's superintendent and a retired brigadier general in the Army.

He couldn't live with his mother, and he had never met his father. The teenager was raised by his cousin and her husband in Southside Chicago.

By the time he got to high school, he was drinking, smoking and ignoring everyone. "I just didn't care about the rules of the school," Curry said. "I didn't think about the consequences of my actions."

One morning, Curry and a buddy drank a few cups of Canadian Mist whisky in the parking lot of the nearby McDonald's. He was drunk before first period and passed out in a school bathroom.

He almost was kicked out of the school, going through an expulsion hearing with his cousin, Ilona Mabry, sitting by his side. But even during the process, his instructors and the commandant prodded him to change his behavior, to salvage his academic career.

Curry was allowed to stay, after he promised to attend a weekend counseling program. One day, when Mabry was driving him there, a car crashed into theirs. Mabry broke her leg and injured her chest; Curry escaped unscathed. "He felt so guilty," she said.

That was the turning point. He realized that his teachers had simply been trying to give him what he needed: some order in his life. The marching, the saluting, the obeying of rules were all part of turning him into someone who deserved respect.

"They changed my life," he said. "They fought for me to stay in school. They really cared about me."

Now, at 17, Curry has stopped drinking and smoking. He has bumped his grades up to A's and B's and begun talking about college, maybe even law school. He's started playing chess with the tough-talking dean of students, James E. Wimes. He's thrown himself into the football team -- he's a running back -- and into his drawing -- he sketches Japanese animation characters. He began a part-time job at a Loews Cineplex. His only major infraction is having long sideburns and a mustache.

Educate, Not Indoctrinate

Parents first reacted to the Chicago Military Academy with suspicion. They didn't want a school that would be a training ground for the military. It took a while for them to realize that the academy was there to prepare the students for college and not war, said Bacon.

Students' schedules are heavy on the basics and light on the electives. They take the core subjects -- English, math, social studies and science -- all four years.

Punishment is levied at the teacher's discretion if students are tardy, don't turn in their homework or misbehave. Some

teachers make the students do push-ups, others call parents. One teacher requires tardy cadets to stand during the entire class.

With no graduating class yet, Bacon has no empirical evidence that his strategy is working. But on a recent day, a steady stream of students arrived at the guidance office to pick up forms for the ACT, the college entrance exam used by most Midwestern colleges.

The academic rigor and high expectations have produced not only high test scores and low truancy rates, school administrators say, but also a measure of self-esteem.

"When they come in, they're looking down. As they begin training, they begin to walk straight, they hold their heads up," said Principal Phyllis L. Goodson. "I'm watching them grow. I'm watching them change. . . . A lot is possible. You just have to give them the right possibilities."

That's what Metts had in mind when she approached the Prince George's school board and community last year about a similar academy. "We're going to paint a picture and a vision and a future for these students that some of them would not have thought of," she said.

The Army has agreed to provide $500 a student for uniforms and books, as well as paying half the salaries of JROTC instructors, donating computers and other equipment and offering guidance. The program will be phased in, beginning with about 400 ninth-graders. All students now attending Forestville will be able to finish the regular program there or have first choice of entering the military academy. Teenagers from other schools also may apply.

As in Chicago, the school will be run by a principal and a military commandant. Metts also has established the Military Academy Foundation to solicit donations from retired and active military personnel and local business leaders, a strategy she learned from Chicago.

Localized Resistance

But even as plans for the school move forward, the community remains uneasy about opening a military academy at a public school.

Some parents and a school board members say the superintendent misrepresented how much money the Army would provide. Metts has denied that accusation. Staff members at the school say they were not consulted enough before the decision was made. Some community leaders have ideological problems.

"Putting a military school in a poor, black community makes it too inviting for these youngsters to go out and volunteer for the military" instead of pursue a college education, said state Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Prince George's).

The organizers of the Chicago Military Academy heard the same complaints. But they faced more daunting odds.

Rather than convert an existing school, Chicago spent $24 million rebuilding the Old 8th Regiment Armory and starting the academy. Bacon, a Korean War veteran, drew up a balance sheet itemizing the expenses and listing the various school system accounts they could come from. He helped raise $10 million from donations.

The challenges didn't end after the school opened in August 1999.

Initially, administrators believed that the Army would supply enough uniforms to last the cadets all four years. But they

soon realized that they needed more for the growing teenagers.

And uniforms alone couldn't instill discipline.

"I think teachers expect soldiers and are completely surprised," said math teacher Alex Van Winkle. "They're teenagers and have stronger influences outside of here. Obviously these kids are not soldiers, nor should they be."

About two dozen students transferred out in the first years because they didn't like the structure.

In the hallway between classes one recent day, the cadets were talking sports, teasing each other, and discussing the Billboard Awards winners announced the previous night.

The following night, at a girl's basketball game, tempers flared. One of the opponents pushed a cadet player. The cadets in the audience grew angry and heckled the opposing team.

"You all need to stop acting like fools. Last night the situation almost got out of hand," Wimes, the dean of students, said the next day during an assembly. "You caused a damn-near riot in my school."

Despite the growing pains, the city considers the academy a success. Construction is underway for a new wing. Next year, the school will have four full classes. Applications -- basically a letter of recommendation and a signed pledge to do their best -- are on the rise.

Sitting in his office with a window overlooking the drill hall, Bacon recalled the first days of the school. "When they first came in here, they were a bunch of ragtag little children who didn't know how to talk," he said.

'I Feel Proud'

"Class, attention!" shouts Cadet Dellareese Jackson, a junior who commands other students.

It's time for algebra class, and Jackson calls out each name.

"Curry," she says.

"Cadet Curry here, ma'am," Lavin Curry responds. He looks like the model cadet with his shirt tucked in, his belt buckle shining and his name tag on straight.

In the halls of the military academy, Curry feels safe. "I don't have to worry about somebody jumping me in the hallways or someone messing with me," he said.

But outside is different. Curry knows not to look directly at some of the teenagers in his neighborhood -- especially when he's wearing his uniform.

One day, Curry was walking home in uniform when he noticed three gang members following him. He couldn't shake them, so he confronted them.

"There's been times I've had to fight in uniform," he said. "But it's hard. The shoes, they're like glass. You run, they break, get a hole in them, and then you have to buy new ones and that costs money."

Now he wears street clothes and comfortable shoes home, for the times he has to run. But once he gets home, he carefully hangs up his uniform. Before he goes to bed, he irons his shirt. He shines his shoes several times a month.

"I feel proud when I go out in my uniform," he said. "There's something about wearing it. You carry yourself differently."